



City of Rome, New York
2012 Budget Message
James F. Brown, Mayor

As Mayor, my focus for the 2012 budget is very simple: It is to move this city forward.

Our record on budgeting in the City of Rome speaks volumes.

Over the past eight years, we have held the line on spending, we have made the difficult decisions – and we have run this city as a successful corporation one that has been clearly responsive of, and responsible to, its shareholders – the taxpayers of the City of Rome.

We have made these decisions not because they were easy or popular, but rather, simply because they were the right choices for the people who pay the bills – the men and women of this city.

Our decisions have been proven, time and time again, to be correct. The proof is in eight straight years of overall growth in the city's tax rolls; in five budgets with no tax increase; and in attracting a wide variety of new retailers to our community – particularly in West and North Rome.

While other communities over this same time period have struggled with double-digit tax increases and massive layoffs in public safety personnel, we have not because we have stayed ahead of the curve. We were one of the first communities in the state to refinance our debt to take advantage of historically low rates; one of the first to enact energy-savings audits and subsequent energy efficiency projects to lower our costs and one of the only communities anywhere in the state to encourage active partnerships with other nearby towns, villages or cities.

Our record speaks for itself – and our workforce should be rightfully proud of the job they have done and the services they provide. They have proven that we can do more with less – and that we can move this community forward by continuing to adhere to our vision of a revitalized Rome.

This budget proposal continues to emphasize economic development; it continues to make each and every penny we receive from the taxpayers productive. It maintains our roads, our sewers, our parks, our water lines to a standard few other communities can match.

In business, it's simple. If you don't reinvest, if you don't maintain your infrastructure, if you don't train and manage your employees, you go out of business....

And I will not let this city go out of business.

Over the past eight years, we've been creative in finding ways to raise revenue and reduce the taxpayers' burden. We've worked with the Council to pass legislation at the State and local level to expand the tax base by encouraging the building of new homes through a residential tax exemption program; to consolidate operates – such as municipal busing – and have worked diligently to restore our neighborhoods and key commercial corridors.

Daily I hear that the City of Rome hasn't looked this good in decades. This has been a product of demolishing blighted buildings, repairing our parks and sidewalks, reinvesting in our storefronts on James and Dominick Streets and paying attention to the streetlights, the flowers and everything in between.

The budget proposal that I present tonight continues to safeguard our infrastructure while continuing to cut discretionary spending. Although we anticipate continued increases in state-mandated retirement and workers compensation costs, we have balanced these where possible by continuing to streamline operations.

This budget proposes a modest 2% increase in both the inside district and outside districts. This equates to an increase of approximately 27 cents per thousand for the Inside District and 12 cents per thousand in the Outside District. A \$60,000 home in the Inside District would pay roughly \$16 more in taxes next year while a \$60,000 house in the Outside District would pay \$7 more next year.

We have held the line on water and refuse fees for 2012 – with no change in rate for these services, reflecting the success of conservative management in these operations. And, although our sewer rates are anticipated to increase 8 percent in the coming year, these costs are a fraction of what residents other local communities are paying.

The directive to my department heads in 2012 is clear -- I will not accept any reduction in services despite further cuts in requested equipment, supplies or contracted services. The fact is that while many of these requests may be justified, we cannot afford them. We have been proactive – and successful -- in our efforts to contain costs – including everything from gas-saving measures to staffing reductions -- and we must continue to plan conservatively, particularly until our state and nation recover from the impact of the ongoing worldwide recession.

I am proud that this budget proposal does not include the layoff of additional full-time personnel. Although this budget eliminates one full-time position (that of the Weed & Seed coordinator Kathy Stockbridge), this formerly federally-funded position is expiring under the guidelines of the grant. I thank Kathy for the exceptional job she did as Weed & Seed coordinator and I am confident that the success of this program and the partnerships that she helped establish between the police and the community in the Weed & Seed target area will continue well into the future. I would also like to acknowledge Mary Davis who was instrumental in the original development of the Rome Weed and Seed.

I am encouraged that the 2012 budget marks the eighth consecutive year of growth in the City's tax base. Over this time, investment in the City of Rome has grown by more than \$71 million. Few, if any, communities can boast similar results. And while the past 12 months have been disastrous for much of the nation, it is significant that we continued to show even modest growth.

I am aware that even modest increases in taxes are not popular, but I want to assure everyone that these increases would not have been proposed if they were not absolutely essential. Without them, we would sink quickly into the mess that has engulfed so many upstate communities: increased blight and decay, double-digit tax increases, rising crime, neglected parks and enormous bonding measures to pay for a crumbling infrastructure and emergency repairs.

In order to present a budget with as small a tax increase as possible, the City of Rome will need to apply \$2 million of the \$5.47 million we currently have in our reserves. I am hopeful that the actual amount of reserves utilized during the coming year will be less than what we budget. Historically, we have been successful in our monthly budget reviews of keeping actual spending below authorized levels – allowing us to use less of our reserves.

While it would have been politically expedient to deplete the reserves to provide additional tax relief, we cannot – nor should not -- risk depleting our reserves or threatening our bond rating.

It is essential that moving forward that we continue to seek additional sources of revenue. Conservatively, we anticipate a modest increase in sales tax revenue – a reflection of the retail development that has occurred in our community. We must do everything we can to maximize this development and to encourage more retailers to come to Rome. The bottom line is that additional retail not only enhances our city's bottom line but also the quality of life of our residents.

Rome has also been named one of the safest communities in the nation, as evidenced by federal crime statistics. Our police department is one of but a few departments across the state that is accredited. We are proud of the job they do, but we are also very aware that their job gets harder every day. Again, while communities from Schenectady to Syracuse, Buffalo to Binghamton, have made to layoff police officer and firefighters over the past several years – we have not. As mayor, I have not, nor will I ever, jeopardize the safety of this community or its residents.

We will, in the coming year, seek out more state and federal grants and actively work with our state and federal officials to try to secure every dime we can for our area. The key to overcoming our budget issues lies in an improving economy and in continued job growth. These issues are not just talk – they are priorities of this administration and this budget proposal and areas that we address each and every day. I look forward to working with the Common Council and with the people of Rome toward making these visions and priorities a reality. This budget proposal is another fiscally responsible and prudent step in that direction.